

even because we are generous. If we want these things for *our* children to enhance their education and their learning opportunities, we must agree that *all* children deserve them too — even if, and *especially* if they can't afford them because they live below the poverty line or in a remote community. And the most effective, cost-efficient, fairest and equi-

table method of establishing and delivering these conditions is not through donations or good wishes, but rather through the collective commitment as demonstrated by an adequate tax base.

It's a lesson that some of the most productive and equitable countries in the world have taken to heart. We would be wise to do the same.


This commentary was based on a presentation made to OSSTF District 25 in January 2007.

Opening doors to discovery



I see the future every day. It's bright. Glowing, in fact. As a teacher, I help children to discover and explore their potential. Every aha moment makes my day. I know that what I do matters.

The future. It's why teachers teach.

 The Alberta Teachers' Association



Giving Up the Grade

BY DAVID F. NOBLE

Critical pedagogy has long condemned grading as an impediment to genuine education, but critical pedagogues continue to grade, as a presumed condition of employment. "I hate it but I have to do it" is their lame lament.

But they no longer have to do it. Throughout the thirty-odd years of my university teaching career I have always found ways around grading, primarily by giving all A's, thereby eliminating grades *de facto* if not *de jure*. Last year for the first time, after long bemoaning my "anomalous" practice, York University officials formally prevailed upon me henceforth to designate my courses "ungraded" (a pass/fail option without the fail), thereby taking them off the radar and perhaps unintentionally establishing a promising academic precedent.

As a tenured full professor, of course, I do enjoy an unusual degree of job security, a privilege provided by a paying public in need of some truth and thus some unshackled, socially responsible scholars. Moreover, as a unionized employee I am protected by a collective agreement which requires only that I submit evaluations on time without specifying

what they "should" be. Thus I am indeed in a good position to challenge the grading regime, but so too are many others who continue to grade.

Why? Typically, as already indicated, colleagues express a fear of administrative reprisal. But they embrace grades also for other, unspoken, reasons, perhaps unacknowledged even to themselves.

Grades offer teachers a convenient device for allaying their anxieties about their own abilities by shifting them onto their students, through an endless round of tests, examinations and evaluations. Grades get teachers off the hook; they preserve professorial authority and are indifferent to professorial incompetence. Bad faith protestations about administration requirements can mask the fact that grades serve the teacher at the expense of the students, and at the sacrifice of education.

But in all this the primary reason for the existence of grades — publicly-subsidized pre-employment screening — is rarely acknowledged. Grades appear to be a matter between teacher and student — until they are "submitted." At that point those for whom

grades are really given — those who have perhaps never even stepped into a classroom — gain access to the measurements of their prospective labour force. Here is the silent third party in the halls of academia, the so-called elephant in the room, to whom academia has too long been hostage. Eliminating grades eliminates the elephant from the room, emancipates academia and reintroduces education.

The elimination of grades at a stroke shifts academic attention from evaluation to education, where it belongs. When skeptical colleagues protest that it is not fair for me to give the same grade both to people who work hard and to people who fail even to show up, I remind them that these people are not getting the same reward because the people who work hard also get an education. "Oh, yeah," they say, remembering as an afterthought what should be at the forefront of their profession.

Students themselves have collectively never resisted my refusal to grade them, and our experiences have been mutually rewarding beyond measure, and all measurement. With grades no longer a matter of concern, no time is ever wasted on discussions about evaluation — heretofore students' primary preoccupation. Without having to fear or defer to professors or peers, students are freed for forthright and authentic engagement, an essential ingredient of genuine education, and discover that they are not alone, despite the rituals of competitive

individualism enforced everywhere else around them.

With the substitution of encouragement for evaluation, intellectual excitement becomes the defining element in the educational ethos, replacing anxiety—which, as every parent knows, is lethal to learning. Abandoning grades annuls alienation: students no longer depend on others for a sense of their own worth.

Without grades, students do not have to try to read the professor's mind — an impossible task anyway, so philosophers tell us — and can instead concentrate upon reading their own minds, self-knowledge being the grail of education. With grades gone, and having thus side-stepped the institutionally routinized regime of infantilization so corrosive of self-respect, self-confidence and self-worth, students can now begin to take themselves and their own thoughts seriously — for too many an altogether novel experience. This is the only true end of education.

The elimination of grades is no longer merely a theoretical proposition. It is an actuality, and a precedent, given my experience at York University. I now teach officially-designated "ungraded" courses with the formal sanction of the Office of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and in full recognition of the Vice President/Academic. From this fertile ground, I advise my colleagues across the country: Try it; you are bound to like it. And so, I suspect, are your students, who

will at last start receiving what they have been presumably been

paying for and what we have been professing to provide.

Historian David F. Noble is a professor at York University in Toronto.

Response to "Giving Up the Grade"

A STUDENT EXPLAINS

I first took a course with Professor Noble in 1992 when I was in the second year of my undergraduate degree. I remember that first day of his class vividly, as it was a turning point in both my approach to education and my views of our education system.

Professor Noble's first order of business on that first day of class was to inform the students that they could all have A's. As a student who was already scoring straight A's, many thoughts were racing through my head — is this a joke? How could he possibly give A's to all these other schleps when they surely won't deserve them? This is unfair! This surely was not a serious way to go about conducting a university course.

My initial skepticism was actualized as the first few weeks of class produced the typical scenario in university undergrad seminars — four or five of us were doing the readings and engaged, while the other 25 or so sat uncomfortably,

some hoping not to be called upon, and others saying something, anything to score a participation mark.

A funny thing happened along the way. By the time we hit the halfway mark of the course, virtually all of the students were highly engaged in the material and discussions each week. These are students who would have never otherwise been so engaged or thoughtful about their studies. They were no longer being processed; they were learning.

For myself, it completely changed the way I approached my education. No longer was it about completing this or that course requirement, pleasing a professor or filling another degree requirement. It was about learning. I was freed from the prison house of grading. I learned how to learn — not how to get good grades (which, though no longer was consumed with concern for them, I still managed to do, incidentally).

*Joseph Graves is a former student of Dr. Noble's and graduated from York University *summa cum laude* in 1994.*